

Leadership Profile of Maria Sotomayor-Giacomucci, Deputy Director of the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition (PICC)

Carly Pourzand 20 January 2020



Photo Credit: Scott Giacomucci

For Maria Sotomayor-Giacomucci, supporting the immigrant community is not her work, *it is her life*. As the Deputy Director of the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition (PICC), Maria offers wisdom and experience in her leadership that can only exist in someone so personally connected to the issues and the

community. Her relationship and her work with immigrant communities across Pennsylvania are supported by the vision, mission, and goals of the community-centered coalition.

As a former undocumented youth and DACA recipient, Maria has always been connected to immigrant rights work, but her journey in community organizing began in 2010 when she was heavily involved in advocating for the Federal Dream Act. The Federal Dream Act is a piece of legislation that as law would provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented youth that came to this country before their 16th birthday. In the process, she was invited to speak about her experiences as an undocumented young person and was connected to various groups across Pennsylvania, including PICC. When she heard about the countless anti-immigrant bills that Pennsylvania legislators were introducing, she immediately signed up for PICC's Advocacy Day and has been linked to the organization ever since.

Her first role at PICC was working with the Philadelphia Deferred Action Network where she reached out to other DACA recipients, coordinated info sessions and legal clinics, and aimed to support DACA-eligible youth. Maria shared about the experience saying, "Having gone through the DACA process myself and wanting other young people to take advantage of that opportunity, I applied for the position and began my work at PICC on January 2nd, 2013." Since then, the future of DACA has

become unclear and the immigrant community have continued to face threatening immigration policies. However, Maria has continued to fight for her community, broaden her understanding of immigration policy, and developing her leadership at PICC.

Maria's experiences as an undocumented youth exposed the lack of resources for students like herself, an experience that has shaped PICC's Education Justice work. Maria was instrumental in creating PICC's ["Education Access for Undocumented Students" toolkit](#) that offers guidance for students in Pennsylvania who are navigating college access with few resources available to them. Additionally, PICC has been working to understand and advocate for K-12 education resources and funding, recently publishing their [2019 Welcoming Schools Report](#). Maria also developed PICC's youth membership program to ensure that the voices of children and young adults shape PICC's work and advocacy priorities. Maria shared, "Working with young people has been one of the most inspiring experiences I have had at PICC, which is why I have pushed to make sure the youth are included in the decision making and campaign planning at our organization [...] They are resilient and courageous."

While Maria has seen PICC grow over the years, she also spoke candidly about her own leadership development at PICC, "Doing this work helped me find my voice, I have become a better public speaker, researcher, and writer. I have also been able to learn many important skills in

fundraising, communications, and media outreach, how to build a mobilizing-base, educate allies, and engage different groups of people. Finally, I have been able to expand my love for the arts and use it in creative ways in our campaigns and workshops."

What is truly transformational about Maria's leadership is her persistent focus on centering community voices. She never approaches a community session, public speaking event, or meeting expecting to *tell* people what she knows. Instead, she approaches her work with open ears, allowing immigrant community members to steer the work she leads at PICC. Community members, PICC partners, and colleagues will all speak to Maria's unique leadership ability. She is never too good for any task, but she leads with ambitious goals. Most importantly, when you are in a room with Maria, you know that you will be heard.

In the process of going "all-in" with the communities she works with; Maria is conscious about managing her energy and preventing burnout. Maria and PICC leadership ensure that they make space for their own wellness in order to authentically elevate community wellness. For inspiration, Maria looks up to the community members who define her work. She also looks to a long lineage of women in her family and the "guerreras" in the movement who have influenced her to be the leader she is today.

So, what's next for Maria?

Her time in organizing and policy work has revealed the absence of mental health resources for the immigrant community. Immigrant community members and community organizers alike do not have equitable access to the resources that are essential for their wellbeing. Maria has had a long relationship with the organization La Puerta Abierta which has provided her with lessons on advocating for access to culturally relevant, community mental health services and shaped a lot of her work today. However, mental health access still has a long way to go. Therefore, this Fall, Maria will continue to propel her leadership forward by attending Bryn Mawr College's Master of Social Services program. This is one more step Maria is taking to expand community resources and uplift community voices.

Author bio

Carly Pourzand is a small group facilitator and has spent most of her career in this field leveraging questions, not answers, to guide her work within Philadelphia's communities. She is a recent graduate of University of Pennsylvania's Master of Social Work program and worked with Maria Sotomayor-Giacomucci on the 2019 Welcoming Schools Report. Carly collaborates on various community-led projects and works as the community engagement specialist at Penn State Center in Philadelphia. She can be reached at carly.pourzand@gmail.com.